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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001979

SIPDIS

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WELCH AND ABRAMS MEET LEBANESE ARMY
COMMANDER

REF: BEIRUT 1950

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Classified By: Charge D'Affaires William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a December 19 meeting with visiting NEA Assistant
Secretary David Welch and Deputy Assistant to the President

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and Deputy National Security Advisor Elliot Abrams, a
confident Lebanese Army Commander Michel Sleiman discussed
the ongoing investigation of General Francois Al-Hajj's
assassination, the current political impasse and his ideas
for an increased role for the presidency. Abrams invited
Sleiman to visit the White House if he is elected President.
End Summary.

¶2. (C) A/S Welch, DAPNSA Abrams, Charge and Defense Attaché
met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Lieutenant
General Michel Sleiman on December 19 at LAF headquarters in
Yarze. LAF Lieutenant Colonel Edmond Homsy also attended
from the Lebanese side. The atmosphere of the meeting was
upbeat and cordial. Sleiman, who is often fidgety during
meetings, was very much at ease, joking and offering cough
drops to his American guests who do not have an "immunity to
Lebanese politics", an inoculation he claimed to have for
himself. Welch had seen Sleiman in Beirut three days before.

Sleiman warmly welcomed Abrams saying, "you are one of the
most famous Americans in Lebanon. Here, everyone knows you."

NOTHING FIRM ON ASSASSINATION, BUT MORE
MONEY IS NEEDED FOR INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

¶3. (S/NF) Sleiman said the investigation into the
assassination of Brigadier General Francois Al-Hajj (reftel)
continues, albeit slowly. Sleiman said it is difficult for
the LAF to investigate the murder due to the closed nature of
the Palestinian refugee camps, thus implying a continued
suspicion of extremist involvement in the assassination.
Sleiman cited a need for an increased intelligence budget for

the LAF G-2 Intelligence Directorate to conduct more human intelligence (HUMINT) operations to prevent assassinations and to quickly investigate them when they occur. Currently, the LAF G-2 annual budget for intelligence operations is three billion Lebanese pounds (approximately two million USD). Sleiman said he has requested ten million USD per year so the LAF G-2 can meet both its army and national intelligence responsibilities, as well as its national security requirements. This request has gone unanswered due, he said, to the distrust of intelligence services by Lebanese politicians.

I WILL NOT ACCEPT THE PRESIDENCY IF I DO
NOT CONTROL POWERFUL MINISTERIAL POSTS

¶4. (C) Turning to the prospects for his election as a consensus president, Sleiman advocated a stronger presidential voice in the new cabinet that would be formed after a president takes office. Specifically, he said he would like to see the president exercise a blocking third in the cabinet. While he has discussed revisions of the Taif Accord that would be necessary to achieve this level of presidential authority with Christian political leaders, Sleiman does not think the time is right to address any amendments of presidential prerogatives outlined in Taif. Instead, Sleiman believes that first the president should be elected without the influence of the Syrians and without other conflict or controversy in Lebanon before any attempts are made to amend presidential prerogatives.

¶5. (C) While waiting for the correct time to ask for such changes to Taif, Sleiman believes the presidency can be strengthened by increasing the president's control over cabinet positions. Sleiman was quite firm when he stated, "I will not accept the presidency without controlling ministries that have real power. I don't care about selecting the Minister of Health or the Minister of Services. I want the

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power to stabilize the political conduct of the country."
(likely referring to the Ministries of Defense and Interior).

I PROPOSE NO BLOCKING THIRD FOR MARCH 8
OR SIMPLE MAJORITY FOR MARCH 14 IN CABINET

¶6. (C) Sleiman has devised his own formula for the division of cabinet portfolios between the majority, opposition and the president. While Sleiman would prefer that 11 cabinet positions be allocated to the president, he understands that this is too many for political blocs to accept. Instead, Sleiman is proposing 10 cabinet seats for the opposition, 13 for the majority and 7 for the president. With this formula, the opposition cannot sack the government at will and the majority cannot force legislation using the simple majority formula of half plus one. Sleiman assured us that Saad Hariri would approve of this increase in cabinet positions for the president as long as both the majority and the opposition positions were distributed equally. According to Sleiman, this formula would allow him to keep the government moving while gaining the trust of the Lebanese people.

I 'M READY TO HANG UP THE UNIFORM AND
GIVE THE CHRISTIANS A NEW POLITICAL CHOICE

¶7. (C) Sleiman said he is ready to leave his position no matter what happens in January. He has already turned over most of the day-to-day operations of the army to the LAF Chief of Staff, Major General Shawki Al-Masri, a Druse officer anointed by Druse leader Walid Jumblatt. If elected, Sleiman said he will take off the uniform gladly, as he has been the LAF Commander for nine years, far longer than most army commanders serve. Sleiman said, "I don't have a social life. I am here Sundays, holidays, nights. I am proud, but

I am ready to give this chair to a young man." During Sleiman's tenure, he has had four Chiefs of Staff and numerous subordinate commanders. Sleiman said he believes that the large age and experience gaps between himself and his staff are causing them to give him advice that he wants to hear versus what they should be telling him.

¶18. (C) If he is not elected President, Sleiman will take off the uniform and establish a third Christian party, he said. He lamented that Christian leaders Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea represent the old, bloody, and factious nature of Christian politics in Lebanon. What is worse, he said, is that fifteen years after their last bloody encounters in Dog River, they are back at the head of their Christian communities, which "follow these crazy men...like sheep to the slaughter." Sleiman contends that the Christians are tired of this binary situation and are hungry for a fresh leader. He sees himself as the leader to assume this role.

INVITATION EXTENDED FOR WHITE HOUSE VISIT;
INVITATION TO CENTCOM CHOD CONFERENCE REINFORCED

¶19. (C) Abrams extended an invitation to Sleiman to visit the White House in the spring if he is elected President. Sleiman was grateful and humble, presumably so as to not appear vainglorious in supposition of an assumed presidential victory. Welch also reminded Sleiman of CENTCOM Commander Admiral Fallon's invitation to attend the regional Chiefs of Defense Conference in Tampa in January. Sleiman responded that he could not leave Lebanon in January if the current political crisis continued, although he would love to visit Tampa since his daughter was spending an extended vacation with her husband in Orlando, Florida.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) Sleiman's performances in meetings with visiting USG officials vary in quality. At this meeting, he was strong, confident and displayed a calmness of purpose. Embassy DATT considered it one of Sleiman's best performances. Sleiman was unassuming concerning his anointment as President, but also had thought about how to strengthen the presidency with

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his proposal for a larger-than-usual number of cabinet seats assigned to the presidency. If accepted, his ideas would reverse one of the major tenets of Taif, the weakening of Presidential power. Sleiman's ideas for Cabinet designations may become part of the negotiation process between the government March 14 bloc and the opposition, who have discussed cabinet seats as part of the negotiation to resolve the impasse on the presidency. However, his ideas might be viewed with suspicion by those loathe to re-empower the Maronite Presidency within the Shia opposition and the Sunni majority.

¶11. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.
GRANT